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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000358

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SMALL EVANGELICAL CHURCH FINDS A COMFORTABLE NICHE

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The International Church of Christ in Ashgabat is a small evangelical group founded by missionaries in the 1990s. The group has been registered for four years and rents a multi-purpose room in a commercial building where it holds its worship services, seminars, and youth activities. The pastor said the group has not had any problems with the Government for more than a year, referring to a "positive dynamic." The group obtained permission from the Government to import a small amount of religious literature sufficient for its needs. It carries out street evangelism without interference from the authorities. The membership is Russian-speaking and largely non-Turkmen. Its biggest current challenge might be one common to many start-up churches -- attracting new members when many people just aren't interested. END SUMMARY.

A STABLE CHURCH LOCATION

¶2. (C) On March 18, Political Officer visited Pastor Dmitriy Mungalov of the International Church of Christ (ICOC) at the rented space where the group holds its meetings. The meeting room is located in the basement of a low-rise commercial building in the middle of a vast Soviet-era high-rise housing project. Mungalov said space from private landlords such as this room is hard to find and costs more than renting in a government-owned building. The advantage has been that the group has been able to stay in the same location for more than a year. Previously, the church rented space at different cafes, but every three months they were told by the property managers that they would have to leave for various reasons that Mungalov felt were just pretexts.

¶3. (C) The ICOC got its start in Turkmenistan in 1996 when a missionary team came from Russia. They started a church and recruited members, but after six months the authorities required the missionaries to leave. By that time the group was already established, although because they lacked registration, the members did not meet together for church services. Instead, they gathered in small groups in apartments or occasionally held picnics outside the city for the whole group. Sometimes the authorities interfered with the small groups and participants were fined, but more often there was just "conversation" with the authorities.

According to Mungalov, the authorities knew that they were harmless, but just wanted to discourage them. It took the group one year to obtain registration. The pastor recounted that the law changed overnight. Some groups had longstanding requests for registration and one day, they got a call from the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) telling them to submit their documentation immediately. Within 24 hours, they were registered. Mungalov explained the Government's sudden turnabout by saying that "in Asia, nothing is decided from the bottom, everything is decided from the top."

WORSHIP SERVICES AND TARGETED SEMINARS

¶14. (C) Currently the church has 27 members, although attendance at services on special holidays is higher. The church also conducts seminars for designated groups. For example, married couples, single people, and single parents. The church members are 60 percent ethnic Russian, with the remainder being Russian speakers of various Central Asian and Caucasian backgrounds. The pastor suggested that Turkmen who speak Russian are culturally "less Islamic," which reduces the intra-family tension if they become church members. He said the church "does not separate children from their parents."

¶15. (C) Mungalov said they do not complain about the difficult period prior to registration. He thought that difficult times benefit believers because they are better able to understand the difficulties faced by the early Christians. He also said that during the past year, the group has had no

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problems with the authorities, adding that there is a "better dynamic." Members of the ICOC church proselytize on the streets without interference. Concerning the reactions of passers-by, he said that most are not interested, and are more concerned about how to make a living. Unlike previously, people are not afraid of being approached. The pastor suggested that people have become more self-reliant in the post-Soviet era as they've found that they cannot rely on the government support. Instead, they have begun to think for themselves and search.

APPROVAL FOR SOME IMPORTED RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

¶16. (C) The ICOC in Ashgabat has not tried to invite any missionaries or foreign speakers to visit them. Mungalov explained that the Ministry of Internal Affairs would not have authorized the issuance of a letter of invitation needed to obtain a visa. However, the pastor said they would try to invite some foreign guests to visit the church this year. He would like to invite people who he has met at church conferences in Moscow, which he said he is able to attend on a regular basis. The church has 30 copies of both the Bible and a songbook that were imported from Russia. Mungalov applied to the CRA for permission and it was approved. The 30 copies are adequate for the group's current needs. If he had asked to bring in 1,000 copies, the pastor said, the request would have been denied. More generally, the group's relations with the CRA are "official," meaning only through written applications such as to import the Bibles or to hold a special meeting. He said the CRA has always approved the group's requests, but if the group tried to do things in secret, the CRA "would clamp down."

¶17. (C) Mungalov mentioned that there was interest among some local pastors to publish a magazine about biblical subjects, but they did not think the idea would be approved by the CRA if it came as a request from the interested pastors. He said two years ago six minority religious groups jointly asked the CRA for permission to organize a roundtable with government officials, but the request "disappeared" and they never received a response. Mungalov thought the event could be useful for the government to learn more about the different confessions. The ICOC also wanted to visit a home for elderly people in order to bring donations and spend time

with the residents. The institution's administration did not openly refuse, but placed conditions on a visit that made it impossible.

¶18. (C) COMMENT: According to Pastor Mungalov, the ICOC faces few restraints on its activities. The group clearly observes legal requirements and maintains an open door policy for all, including government officials, although they seldom stop by.

The ICOC's success in importing religious literature and conducting street evangelism may be related to its modest size, as well as the fact that the group does not have many ethnic Turkmen members. The pastor himself said that a larger number of bibles and songbooks wouldn't have been approved. Still, for this start-up church, the challenges of winning over a largely indifferent public appear to be greater than any obstacles currently imposed by the government. END COMMENT.

MILES